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‘Fox Tots Attack Shock’: Urban foxes, mass media and spatial boundaries

Angela Cassidy^a and Brett Mills^b

^a Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine (CHoSTM), Department of Humanities, Imperial College London, S. Kensington Campus, London, SW7 2AZ, UK. Corresponding Author¹

^b School of Film and Television Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, UK

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Abstract

On June 7th, 2010, media reports appeared that nine month old twins living in East London had been rushed to hospital following a ‘suspected fox attack’: the babies had been seriously injured. This story received sustained and intense coverage for several months, and became the focus of debate over the role and behaviour of urban foxes, and how they and humans should coexist. Using textual analysis to unravel the various discourses surrounding this moment, this paper discusses how this incident became such a prominent ‘media event’. Alongside the more immediate contexts of the ‘silly season’ and a period of political transition, we argue that this incident breached a series of spatial boundaries that many societies draw between people and the ‘natural world’, from the ‘safest space’ of a child’s cot, to the categorisations made of animals themselves. We discuss the consequences of such boundary breaches, including confusion over the assignment of responsibility for, and expertise about, the figure of the ‘urban fox’.

Keywords: human-animal studies; urban environments; space and boundaries; animals and media; wildlife

¹ Email: angela.cassidy@imperial.ac.uk; angela.cassidy@gmail.com

Introduction

On June 7th, 2010, an unusual story appeared in the British news media. The previous Saturday evening, a pair of nine month old twins living in East London had been rushed to hospital following a ‘suspected fox attack’: and were thought to have been seriously injured. Few other details were available, but a police statement suggested that the animal, thought to have been a wild urban dwelling fox, might have “managed to sneak into the house” (Cain, 2010, p. 1) through an open door or window. The story was covered by all major national newspapers and *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Mirror* chose to run with the story on their front covers. Over the next few days, further details emerged: The family lived in an “£800,000 three-storey Victorian terraced house in Stoke Newington, East London” (Loveys and Kisiel, 2010, p. 3), an up and coming urban area. The twins were called Lola and Isabella Koupparis; their parents, Pauline and Nick had been watching TV downstairs while the babies slept and were alerted by crying:

I went into the room and I saw some blood on Isabella’s cot,” she [Pauline] said yesterday. “I thought she’d had a nosebleed. I put on the light and I saw a fox and it wasn’t even scared of me, It just stared me straight in the eye. I started screaming. Then I realised that Lola was also covered in blood. My husband came running up - by this stage we were both screaming hysterically – and the fox didn’t even move. My husband lunged at it a few times and it just moved a few inches each time. (McSmith, 2010, p. 20)

This dramatic interview material set the tone of the news coverage from here on in: the injuries looked like “something from a horror movie” (Sears and Ellicott, 2010, p. 22) and “the hunt” (Hough, 2010, p. 11) was on. Blurry mobile phone pictures of the alleged perpetrator (or perhaps a relative?) were published (McTague, 2010), as well as alarming-looking stock photos of foxes yawning (see, e.g. Trimming, 2011). Marksmen and police protection for the family were mobilised, and London Mayor Boris Johnson urged local councils to “focus on their duties for pest control because as romantic and cuddly as a fox is, it is also a pest” (Fagge, 2010, p. 4). Newspaper readers were provided with daily updates on the injuries, progress and recovery of the children. The Koupparis parents worked closely with the media, providing photographs of the children, themselves and their house, several interviews (e.g. Hutchison and Edwards, 2010), a series of press releases, and appearing on a specially commissioned BBC1 documentary programme, *The Fox Attack Twins* on the 2nd July (Burnett, 2010). A second documentary, *Urban Fox Attack* (Oord, 2010) was aired on 4th July, which looked at the phenomenon of the urban fox more generally.

The event precipitated a media debate over the role of the fox in this incident, and about urban foxes more generally, whereby fox experts and advocates expressed surprise, emphasised the rarity of such events, and suggested that if it was a fox, then something aberrant had occurred. On the other side of the debate, the editor of *Country Life* magazine, Clive Aslet, wrote that foxes should be “cleared from our streets”, arguing that they had become increasingly common and constituted a dangerous pest. Drawing parallels with country foxes’ well-known predatory habits, Aslet wrote: “A lamb is much the same size as a baby. It is no more difficult to get into a house than a hen coop” (2010, p. 18).

This debate, and the ongoing progress of the children’s recovery, sustained consistent coverage in both national and local newspapers for the following two weeks, while through the rest of the summer, a series of other, more minor ‘fox attacks’ and other urban fox-related stories continued to appear (e.g. Gardner, 2010; Pugh, 2010; Stretch, 2010). In early July, there was a second spike of coverage associated with the two above mentioned documentaries about urban foxes, and release of pictures of the children, after which the story tailed off. In early August, the story took a new turn with newspapers describing the appearance of a video on Facebook of a group of men chasing and attacking an urban fox with a cricket bat in a park close to the Koupparis’ house. The video attracted widespread condemnation from animal welfare and anti-hunting campaigners, members of the public and journalists. A few days later, it was revealed to be a hoax, made by documentary filmmakers in response to “media hysteria” over urban foxes (Lewis, 2010, p. 4). Strikingly, the main Koupparis story did not reappear after this time, aside from small related stories such as the publication in September of a survey suggesting that the incident had made people more mistrustful of wildlife (Gray, 2010, p. 9).

This article provides an analytical response to this event, and the sequence of media coverage surrounding it, in order to address two key questions. Firstly, why did this incident attract the level of media attention that it did? Sporadic local and national press articles about so-called ‘fox attacks’ prior to the summer of 2010 suggest that such incidents do occur from time to time (e.g. Jury, 1996, p. 5; McLaughlin, 2004, p. 5; Sapstead, 2002, p. 6), yet had received relatively little media attention. Furthermore, the overall tone of the Koupparis coverage was one of extreme shock, surprise and fear: given that foxes are generally agreed to be carnivorous animals, and are not generally kept as domestic pets, why was this? We will address these questions through an analysis of the UK press and other media through the summer of 2010, initially examining the specific combination of media and political contexts that could have contributed to coverage of this event becoming such a ‘media storm’. Following this, we will move on to argue that, beyond these more immediate factors, this

incident provoked such extreme responses because it breached a whole series of boundaries that British and other urbanised societies draw between people and the 'natural' world. These range from the breach of the ultimate 'safe space' of a child's cot, right through to the ways in which animals themselves are categorised and ordered by humans as part of society. Finally, we will discuss the consequences of such a potent series of boundary breaches, including confusion over the assignment of expertise about, and responsibility for, this profoundly unsettling event.

Materials and methods

Using the Lexis-Nexis online media archive, we searched the 'UK newspaper stories' database¹ for the phrase 'fox attack' over the period June to September 2010. This yielded an initial sample of 325 articles, from which letters, repetitions², and irrelevant stories were excluded, leaving a final sample of 155 articles: qualitative analysis has focused upon reporting in the national press. A supplementary search, of national and local press for the period June 2000-June 2010, was also carried out; alongside searches ('fox attack' and 'Koupparis') for online content using Google and the BBC News website. Finally, relevant material aired on British national television over the summer of 2010 was also viewed: this included some news material, two documentaries (*The Fox Attack Twins*, BBC, 2nd July 2010; *Urban Fox Attack*, Channel Four, 4th July 2010), and a comedy series about urban animals (*Mongrels*, BBC, 2010). The material was analysed using an informal approach inspired by grounded theory (e.g. Strauss and Corbin, 1998), whereby the material was approached with the above general research questions in mind, and relevant theoretical frameworks were applied during the analytical process. Starting with an initial 'surface read' of the central newspaper sample, both authors worked through an iterative process of reading separately, followed by meeting together to draw out the emerging themes of discussion and key theoretical concerns, followed by a return to the empirical material, and so on. This approach gave us the necessary flexibility to integrate the very different sources of newspaper, online and television media; and to produce a fully collaborative mode of analysis.

Contours of a media event

Figure One illustrates the distribution of coverage in UK newspapers over the period of the Koupparis story, from early June until mid-September, 2010, reflecting the development of the story described above. As we have described, compared with coverage of previous "fox attacks", this incident provoked an intense media response particularly in the national press. Looking at the immediate context of the story may provide some insight into why, as can consideration of media working practices which

could have shaped such a response. Firstly, the particular timing and broader circumstances are worthy of attention. The story initially broke in early June, a time of year where the British media tend to be winding down in anticipation of the summer break, the suspension of Parliament in July, and the fallow time of year for news known as the ‘Silly Season’. At this time of year, a lessening of the volume of sources for general news can sometimes lead to issues which would otherwise be considered less important to gain much more of an airing as newspapers in particular look for content to fill their pages (Bowman, 2006).

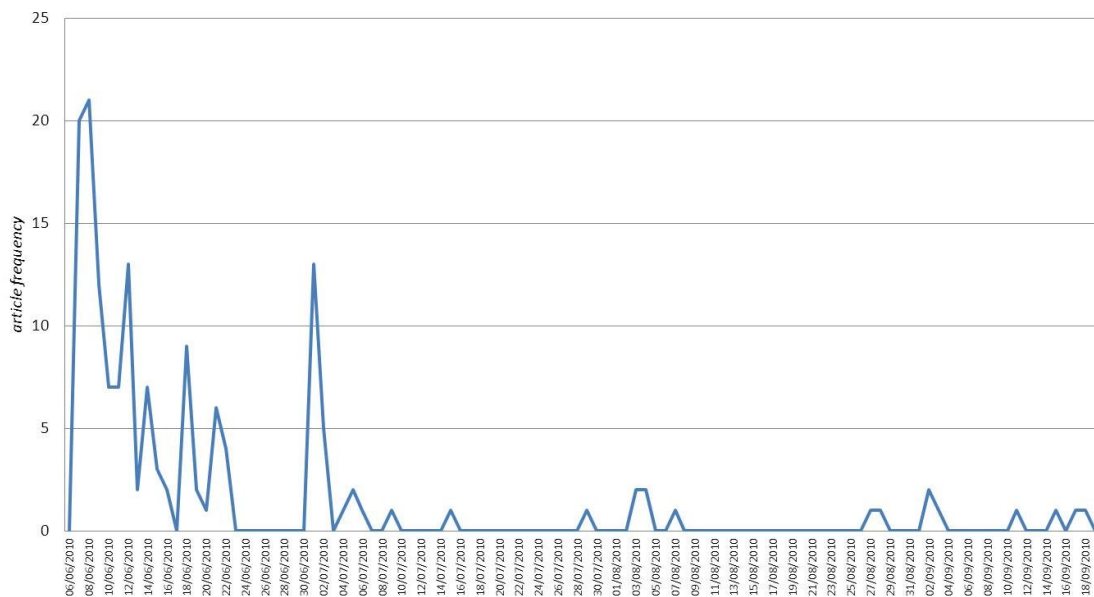


Figure 1: Frequency of ‘fox attack’ articles in UK press, 6th June – 17th September 2010

In the summer of 2010, this was accentuated by political circumstance: the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government had been in power for less than a month when the ‘fox attack’ story broke. At the time, the new Coalition had made no official announcement of their policies, and the resulting political limbo would have left a bigger gap in news media than would be usual for that time of year. In addition, this transition had some very specific resonances around foxes: the previous Labour government had controversially banned foxhunting with hounds in 2004, and it was widely thought that any incoming Conservative administration would be very likely to repeal this law.³ This gave the story an additional political angle to an already highly newsworthy event.

When we look at the nature of the story and the people in it, we can see that these are congruent with several sets of powerful ‘news values’ (Gans, 1979; Lee, 2009). These would include the novelty/surprise element of the incident (in terms of media framing); the relevance/meaningfulness and personalisation of the story (i.e.

the possibility for the reader/author to relate to it); the nature of the victims (young children of a middle class family in an area of London that many media workers live in/near); and of course a risk/fear factor in the event itself. Furthermore, the distribution of the story across the different parts of the British newspaper market, as shown in Table 1, is worthy of note: considering the much more limited space available in tabloid titles compared to other newspapers, we can see that this was a ‘tabloid story’ in a way that many others are not. The nature of the story (as a shocking, frightening event), and of the victims (young children), would have particularly appealed to the news values, shared discourse and identity of these titles (Conroy, 2006).

| National broadsheet | National mid-market | National tabloid | Regional local press + | Newsire (press releases) |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| 30 | 22 | 33 | 70 | 10 |

Table 1: Distribution of ‘fox attack’ articles June-Sept 2010 in UK newspapers and news wires⁴

When taken as a whole, the press and other media coverage of this incident follows a very specific pattern: an initial media ‘storm’ which becomes self-sustaining for some weeks, followed by a more spaced out period of stories which temporarily reintroduce interest in the topic, followed by a rather abrupt end, beyond which very little coverage appears. Critcher (2003) surveys the extensive literature on the concept of ‘moral panics’, and observes that the processes that media undergo when covering such topics form a specific pattern, one which conforms closely to our description of the ‘fox attack’ coverage above.

Moral panics

Beyond coverage patterns, this event can be seen as emblematic of moral panic as a media event in other ways. The ‘classic’ working definition of a moral panic is given by Cohen:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. (1) A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; (2) its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; (3) the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; (4) socially accredited

experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; (5) ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; (6) the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (1972/2002, p. 9)

Key in such a definition is the idea that moral panics play out via a process; that is, that there is a number of stages within which moral panics come into being, play out, and lead to consequences. Much analysis of moral panics has, therefore, attempted to refine Cohen's model, applying it to specific events to see how well it describes real-life sequences. Indeed, Rohloff and Wright argue that much of this work "has relied upon ritually reproducing the 'stages'" (2010, p. 404) outlined by Cohen, side-lining sociological dimensions of the phenomenon. They call for studies to therefore engage with debates about risk, regulation, politics, and ideas of civilization, in order to more fully explore how moral panics come about and the social assumptions they rely upon for their force. The stages that occur within moral panics are, by this account, significant less because they recur across many instances, and more because in order to function they must rely upon, and reproduce, ways of thinking about the world which are so normalised that their disruption causes the panic under scrutiny.

One of the key discourses within which moral panics circulate is that of the news media, and Altheide (2009) outlines the ways in which the norms of news story-telling aligns neatly with the structure of moral panics. Partly this is because the different stages of a moral panic can be neatly turned into successive news reports, and there is a built-in time-frame for such an event. But Altheide also argues that moral panics and news media similarly neatly align around "a discourse of fear [that] may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the symbolic environment as people define and experience it in "everyday life" (2009, p. 81). While risk is often argued to be a central component of contemporary societies (Beck, 1992) and moral panics can be seen to centre on social fears, Ungar (2001) argues that a distinction must be drawn between the two because moral panics usually have a moral and local dimension which is not core to the largely global risk society. These debates are useful for our analysis of the fox attack story because the concern over the relationships between humans and other creatures feed into global concerns over humanity and nature, while the local, small-scale, moral dimension of the event is predicated on its focus on very particular locations and the actions of parents and communities. Indeed, contemporary ideas of the city often bring together this tension between the local and large-scale, as cities represent the "impossibility of making a neat distinction between [human] culture and nature" (Hubbard, 2006, p. 155).

Furthermore, the fact that this moral panic was initiated by the actions of non-human species brings an interesting inflection to debates about how such panics play out and their social roles. That is, the vast majority of studies of moral panics focus on concerns over human behaviour; for example, all of the case studies Critcher uses to demonstrate how moral panics function – including child abuse, rave culture, and video nasties – show a concern over human behaviour (2003, p. 31-117). While Molloy (2011) successfully applies the moral panics framework to fictional animal ‘monsters’, such as *Jaws*, in the fox case we observe a crucial difference. In general, the aims of such panics are to question the actions of humans, with the intention of realigning deviant behaviour with culturally accepted codes of civilised actions. Yet such paradigms cannot be brought into play when examining the behaviour of non-human species, for core to the ways in which humans distinguish themselves from all other living things is through an assertion that humans alone have an “awareness of self” (Rogers and Kaplan, 2004, p. 180) which means they can engage in moral debate over appropriate behaviour. While the fox attack events certainly led to debates about the appropriateness of human *response* to the ‘threat’ of urban foxes, missing from this moral panic was the assumption that the foxes themselves could be ‘civilised’ into being moral agents, even though this is a recurring trope in the majority of such stories. We argue that the coverage of this event initially took the familiar form of the ‘moral panic’ trope, but this gradually unravelled, due to this lack of ascribed agency at the centre of the story, particularly as the moral ambiguities of the “urban fox” became clearer.

Disruptions and boundary breaches

While the more immediate contextual reasons for this incident becoming such a prominent media event seem fairly clear (timing; news values; moral panics), none of this really addresses the question of why one individual incident should spark the intense tone of shock, surprise and fear present in the media response. To answer this, we turn to the coverage itself to show how this incident breached a whole series of societal boundaries drawn around humans, animals and ‘nature’. We are drawn upon a wealth of literature which sees understandings of nature as predicated on assumptions about boundaries, and these boundaries are ones which commonly distinguish between urbanised areas (dominated by humans) and ‘natural’ spaces which, while clearly shaped by human behaviour, are perceived to be outside of the normal, everyday realm of human activity. This distinction between human and natural spaces is traced historically by Eder, who argues that the “social construction of nature is necessarily an element of the social evolution of society” (1988/1996, p. 8). By this account, understandings of what it is to be a human living in a ‘civilised’ society are dependent on distinguishing between that human realm and the rest of the world,

whereby other spaces and the species that live within them are, by definition, wild and uncivilised. As Whatmore and Thorne note, the wild is “a place without us, populated by creatures... at once monstrous and wonderful, whose strangeness gives shape to whatever we are claimed to be” (1998, p. 435). Such labels clearly have hierarchical implications, and when human attempts to define themselves in social terms – such as those collected in books like *What Makes Us Human?* (Pasternak, 2007) – repeatedly draw on concepts intended to demonstrate human superiority, including language, cooking, intelligence and curiosity. Boundaries between human and non-human spaces become, therefore, extremely important, as they serve to justify and uphold paradigms of social progress, p. aradigms that can be challenged when a fox attacks some children.

Of course, these understandings are not straightforward, and it is impossible to definitively tie them down or preserve them concretely. Indeed, Castree argues that central to our “knowledges of nature” is that they must “compete”, with such competition being played out between academia, the media, government, business, and citizens (2005, pp. 12-14). Foxes provide a useful case study for the analysis of these ‘knowledges of nature’ because of the ambivalent roles which they play across many cultures and countries, whereby they are often represented as ‘tricksters’ and as a source of societal disruption (Wallen, 2006). Furthermore, the role of foxes in British society includes further tensions surrounding their historical role as legally assigned ‘vermin’ and as an animal hunted for sport (Lovegrove, 2007, pp. 209-216). The event under analysis here can be seen to exemplify a particularly modern understanding of the creature, for the reporting of the event is predicated on the assumption that ‘urban foxes’ are a relatively new and rapidly increasing even though mammal ecologists working with urban foxes do not believe that populations have risen significantly since the 33,000 estimated across the country in 1980 (Baker and Harris, 2001). As will be shown, the human fear that accompanies the urban fox is one reliant on assumptions about space; it is precisely the fox entering the home – a resolutely *non-wild* place – which engenders the fear and surprise in the narrative of the news event. Human/animal boundaries are by definition drawn by humans, and in doing so they exert power/control over spaces and resources: when those assigned to the “outside” come in, the response moves beyond one to a simple physical threat.

The nursery

“Twin baby girls were seriously ill in hospital today after being mauled by a fox in their beds. The nine-month-old sisters were savaged while sleeping in their cots on Saturday night.” (Morgan, 2010, p. 1)

These are the first two sentences of the initial press release about the incident. Several words immediately stand out: 'baby girls'; 'mauled/savaged' and 'cots'. Very quickly the nature of the incident is sketched out – a 'savage' wild animal has entered what should be the ultimate place of safety for a baby (sleeping in its cot), and attacked. So we have the literal, physical breach of the safest place for the most vulnerable kind of human by an active and violent nonhuman agent. The nature of these victims also taps into a series of contemporary anxieties around babies/young children and risk. While these are particularly apparent in debates around childcare, parenting and risk (Furedi, 2001; Lee, 2008; Kehily, 2010), they also surfaced in the fox attack coverage. Considering that many of these discourses have a normative focus upon parents and 'good parenting', including protection of children from risk, it is striking that this coverage rarely pointed a finger of blame at the parents, as was seen in the Lindy Chamberlain case in Australia in the 1980s.⁵ Instead media stories focused on the Koupparis family unit as the 'victim', and on themes of search for/retribution towards the perpetrator of the 'crime'. The idea that these children were not irresponsibly exposed to any risk, and yet could still become victims of such a 'violent attack', clearly enabled rhetorics of fear and panic around the incident to become intensified.

This entry of the fox into a space culturally understood to be safe demonstrates the extent to which the home functions as a private space within which most activities can be monitored and controlled. Summarising a wealth of empirical work on Western ideas of the home, Blunt and Dowling show that "Home provides shelter, and also provides a setting in which people feel secure and centred" (2006, p. 9); indeed, it is via a sense of security that the bricks and mortar that make up a house are transferred into a place with "feelings and attachments" (p. 10), whereby homes become far more to their occupants than simply a building. An intruder entering a home is, then, more than simply an act of transgressing geographical boundaries. Because "People's sense of self is also expressed through home", (p. 9) an attack on the home is also an attack on the coherence of the identity of the people running the home. The confusion, bewilderment and shock evident in the parents' reaction to the event can, therefore, be seen as arising from a destabilising of the physical *and* emotional certainties embedded in their home, for the fox is seen as not only failing to conform to spatial boundaries but has similarly trampled all over the parents' sense of self. This means that contemporary cultural understandings of the family are central to this media event too, particularly relating the ways in which the family themselves became conflated with ideas of the home as a space.

The family

Pauline and Nick told how cops at their home soon after the attack saw a fox approach the patio doors again.

Pauline said: "They said within minutes of being in the house, they'd seen the fox trying to get in the back door like a dog. It was scratching on the door. I thought I was going to be sick. We told the police, 'You've got to warn our neighbours', because there are young children everywhere round here and we were just petrified it would do it to someone else."

Even now, as she attempts to get back to normal life, Pauline admitted that she still lives in fear of the fox. She said: "When the girls are here I don't open the doors and it's a bit of a panic every night. 'Have you locked the door? Are the windows all closed?' I'm quite frightened of keeping the doors open now."

Nick said: "It's probably the same feeling burglary victims get. We feel our family unit has been violated." (West, 2010, p. 4)

The family unit here is depicted as thoroughly respectable: married, wealthy, with three children, and again the themes of fear, outrage and 'violation' come through in discussions of the family and their home. As far as we know, the fox had entered the house through patio doors left open due to the heat (which could have happened for all sorts of reasons), but the coverage portrays the animal as an active, malicious intruder. The 'fox attack' stories we found prior to the incident seemed to involve different kinds of 'victims', such as pensioners (McLaughlin, 2004, p. 5), which suggests that there is something about the nature of the family involved which triggered such a strongly sympathetic reaction.

The space, here, then is a family one, and an attack on members of that family is perceived to be an attack on the coherence of that family as a whole. This can perhaps be related to contemporary concerns over the collapse of what is erroneously termed the 'traditional' family. As Tinknell notes, "the monolithic model of an ideal family becomes increasingly difficult to sustain ideologically" (2005, p. 134) because of rises in divorce rates, changes in gender roles, and increasing acceptability of alternative family structures (Hafner, 1993). However, cultural understandings of the home remain tied to traditional ideas of family, to the point where they are often treated interchangeably. This means that "Running through notions of ideal homes as family-centred is heterosexism" (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p. 114); the perfect home is one made up of father, mother and children. Indeed, because of rising concerns about the dangers of outside spaces (Valentine, 2001) children now spend more time playing at home than was the case previously. Therefore the house becomes a site whose family-ness is predicated on its security and separation from the dangerous and wild spaces outside. Such spaces are largely purged of other species, aside from domestic pets,

who are generally treated and understood as “companion species”, or even as kin (Haraway, 2008).

The ‘Urban Fox’?

At this point we would like to explore the term ‘urban fox’ and its usage and meanings. What is an urban fox? At face value: a fox that lives in a city. However, even this points to some of our assumptions about this particular nondomestic animals and space, because by implication a ‘fox’ without the urban belongs somewhere else – the countryside. As a counterexample, very few people would talk about ‘urban rats’ because rats are generally assumed to live in an urban environment. This oxymoronic status, combined with the general reaction of shock and surprise to the event, led to considerable confusion and contradictions in discussions of the animal itself, what had happened, whether it could be considered to be typical of its kind, or even whether it was actually a fox in the first place.

Following the initial reporting of the story, a range of sources were turned to for further information, experience or commentary: about the incident itself, urban foxes, fox behaviour, and the broader implications. Examining media practices around sourcing can provide important insights about the assignment and performance of expertise in the public domain (e.g. Mellor, Webster, & Bell, 2011, pp. 66-71). In the ‘fox attack’ case, the sheer range and variety of sourcing, in terms of people called upon to comment as well as non-journalists writing about the incident, is worthy of note. Such sources included the family themselves; neighbours; policemen; the Mayor of London; pest-control professionals; wildlife rescue and conservation activists; and wildlife TV presenters. While information from scientific sources in the form of mammal biologists was occasionally cited, we found that no biologists were quoted in interview or contributed articles themselves. This absence contributed to an atmosphere of confusion about who could make ‘expert’ knowledge claims about what an urban fox might or might not do, as well as how valid any such claim made might be.

Many of these sources, particularly from those who had some form of professional expertise regarding urban foxes, argued that the incident was not at all typical of fox behaviour (Cummings, 2010; Dimmer, 2010). Usually this meant speculating that the animal was aberrant in some way: it was a juvenile or was sick; that it had simply panicked; or even that it had been fed by the family or their neighbours and that this had altered its behaviour. Despite this, the animal was rarely if ever individualised, and most coverage instead talked of “foxes” or “urban foxes” as a group:

Ricky Clark, a rat catcher who runs the London-based firm Environ Pest Control, warned: “Yes, it’s unusual, but it will happen again. We have 25,000-30,000 foxes in London alone, and they are losing their fear of humans. I’ve been getting calls from people who say, ‘We’ve just had a fox come through our cat flap and it’s in the sitting room’. I’ve caught foxes in kitchens, in basements, even in nightclubs. These aren’t the cuddly little red furry animals some people think they are. It’s not Basil Brush we’re dealing with here. These are feral animals, full of diseases. (McSmith, 2010, p. 20).

The accuracy of the Koupparis’ account was also called into question: by wildlife experts who asserted that a fox simply would not have repeatedly attacked in the way that had been said, but also by many members of the public, commenting on news stories or posting on social media sites such as Facebook (see reader comments below Barkham, 2010b; Facebook, 2010). Many of these comments were actively defensive of the fox/foxes in general and hostile to the family: asserting the aesthetic value of foxes and their ‘shy’ nature, and suggesting that, for example, the animal in question was in fact a dog, or even the Koupparis’ own dog (its presence had been noted but not questioned in media reports). An interesting comparison can be drawn with media depictions of attacks from ‘dangerous dogs’, in which the socially undesirable traits (e.g. in terms of class, race, social responsibility) of the dog’s owner are often accentuated (Freccero, 2011; Gerber, Burton-Jeangros, & Dubied, 2011). Responsibility for dog attacks is generally attributed to the owner, in both social and legal terms, whereas no-one is considered to be responsible for the urban fox. A further ambiguity is revealed when considering that in the urban environment human/fox interactions are common, and at times welcomed. Urban foxes are sometimes “invited” into human space via feeding, at least as far as the garden: this may implicitly confer on them some of the “safety” usually ascribed to pets. This left the moral panic around the Koupparis incident both with and without a moral agent at its centre, contributing to the confusion, and to both mainstream media framings of the family as blameless victims and counter-narratives attempting to do the opposite.

The BBC comedy *Mongrels*, aired on free digital channel BBC3 (McCrum, 2010), an adult oriented comedy using puppets of a range of urban animals, such as cats, dogs and pigeons, draws on such contradictions as a source of humour. The central character, Nelson, is described as ‘an urbane fox’ who also lives in Hackney, drinks skinny lattes and subscribes to broadsheet newspapers: he is contrasted with ‘real fox’ Vince, who is a ‘proper wild animal’, and is predatory and violent.⁶ The programme

was first broadcast on June 22nd, two weeks into the fox attack story, and director Adam Miller commented on the relevance of the programme to the case:

“Yes, it’s obviously an awful story,” he says, while Heath agrees that “Foxes have got a slight image problem suddenly.” Never the less, Miller explains the thinking behind his highly humanised star: “Foxes have adapted to a completely new environment and are now scavenging in skips full of lattes and focaccia outside Starbucks. We took that one step further and made Nelson a fully-fledged, moisturising metrosexual.” (Hogan, 2010, p. 41)

That the director of an entirely unrelated comedy programme which happens to include puppet foxes is called upon to make links between his work and a real-world newspaper story shows the ways in which media events come to define the discourses within which a topic circulates, as well as the assumption that there is something called ‘the fox’ which is identical across all of its representations. To be sure, Miller’s statement about the ‘metrosexual’ Nelson draws on social concerns about the urban fox, just as the media event under analysis here does. But, the conflation of the two demonstrates how human understandings of other species assumes there are norms for such species; that is, that this fox attack story tells us something about the species as a whole, rather than the actions of one individual fox in very particular, and not very common, circumstances. Making sense of non-human species in human environments, therefore, is predicated on the assumption that the behaviours of all members of a particular species are uniform. That human identity is commonly predicated on ideas of individuality and self-identity shows how other species are used by humans to define humanity. It is for this very reason that a “freakish event” (‘A freakish event’, 2010, p. 6) like this fox attack is extrapolated by the news stories and commentators into evidence of fox behaviour overall (Bruce 2010), quite contrary to its evidently exceptional nature.

Humans and “Nature”; humans and other animals

The above discussion highlights how not only the incident itself, but also the ambiguous figure of the “urban fox”, simultaneously highlights and undermines a whole series of societal boundaries between ‘safe’/‘human’ and ‘risky’/‘nonhuman’ spaces. For many journalists and commentators on the Koupparis case, this ambiguity clearly was a symptom of the underlying problem that had led to the attack, and required resolution. For broadcaster and naturalist Terry Nutkins (2010) part of the problem was the presence of these ‘wild’ animals in urban space, and he advocated their removal from cities. These discussions highlight societal widespread assumptions about the separation of humans and ‘Nature’, articulated in terms of physical space. In

turn, nondomestic animals are often perceived as existing or belonging in 'natural' spaces such as wilderness (e.g. Buller, 2004): the British countryside seems to occupy some kind hinterland between the two (e.g. Horton, 2008a; 2008b). Such assumptions often underlie discussions of the presence or activities of other 'wild' animals in urban spaces, as seen cases such as the growing population of wild boar living in central Berlin (Evans, 2011), urban badgers in the UK (Adams, 2008) and elephants in Indian cities (Gayle, 2011).

As well as the breach of boundaries between human and nonhuman spaces, such events can be interpreted as disrupting societal boundaries differentiating between human and nonhuman animals. Knight (2000), argues that this kind of boundary-breaching is associated with particular conflicts between humans and animals, and the rhetorical construction of such animals as pests via 'pestilence discourses'. The broader literature on human-wildlife conflict also reveals that representations of animals in such cases are often highly dichotomous (Cassidy, 2011; Hytten, 2009; Jones, 1999), as we have seen here with both urban and rural foxes in the UK. The negative aspect of such constructions is often exaggerated to reinforce reactions of fear and disgust, which then in turn are used to justify human actions against such 'pest' or 'vermin' animals. Such actions range from conservation or disease control oriented culling, through day to day intolerance from humans to active retribution and punishment of animals constructed as criminals (Fissel, 1999; Potts, 2009; Song, 2000). As we have noted, one of the first reactions to the 'fox attack' incident was a desire to seek out and destroy the perpetrator, through pest control, hired marksmen, and public statements by politicians and others. With the growing popularity of practices policing human/animal, and human/'nature' boundaries, such as biosecurity (e.g. Hinchcliffe and Bingham, 2008), it could be argued that in certain contexts such retributive actions towards animals "out of place" (Douglas, 1966, p. 36) may be on the rise (Barker, 2010). Certainly Gerber et al. (2011) report increasing levels of (Swiss) media reporting of risks associated with animals in general: it would seem likely that such a context contributes to an atmosphere of anxiety about human/animal encounters.

The particular position of the urban fox may have accentuated these general problems of boundary-breaching in the Koupparis case. As well as stepping across the lines drawn between human/nonhuman space and human/nonhuman animals, the urban fox disrupts categories constructed by humans for different *types* of animal. Such categorisations include domesticated/wild; pet/working/agricultural; charismatic wildlife/pest; food/not-food. These categories vary across cultures and historical periods, suggesting that they must be constantly maintained by society in order to function in our ordering of human/animal relations (Herzog, 2010; Hytten, 2009,

Knight, 2000). Furthermore, the position of the fox as a predator, and in this case a predator which has harmed human children, accentuates its position not only as a pest, but a competitor and source of danger to 'us'. This marks it out as a particular source of both fear and respect (Corbett, 2006, pp. 180-87; Marvin, 2001).

At this point, it may be helpful to compare across societal constructions of 'dogs' more broadly. Attacks on humans by domestic dogs in the UK appear to be relatively commonplace, with approximately 230,000 reported cases each year (Hood, Baldwin & Rothstein, 2001, p. 37). However, relatively few of these cases are reported in the media, and we note the paucity of social research on dog attacks compared to the well-developed literature on the benefits of dogs as companion animals (Chur-Hansen, Stern, & Winefield, 2010). In contrast, high levels of fear and anxiety are expressed around the co-existence or potential co-existence of humans and wolves, relative to the risk of injury from these animals (Buller, 2008). Work on the role of the dingo, (a wild dog) in Australian society highlights how representations of the animal, and the risks it poses, are dualistic and ambivalent, shifting from cherished native wildlife to an invasive, violent pest (Healy, 2007; Hytten, 2009). A similar ambivalence has already been noted in representations of foxes (Wallen, 2006), and it is probable that this is related to their breaching of human-animal boundaries (Marvin, 2000). Looking across these species, we draw a tentative continuum with dogs (owned / controllable / human responsibility) at one end; wolves (wild / uncontrollable / their own responsibility) at the other; and foxes and dingoes (neither fully wild nor properly owned) somewhere in the middle.⁷

We argue that the coverage of this incident moved rapidly from a straightforward narrative of an attack on children by a dangerous pest into a minor public controversy because of culturally and politically specific contexts around human/animal boundaries; the status of 'wildlife'; animal welfare; ; and the contested role of foxes in British society. Historical intersections between environmentalism, Romanticism and early animal welfare movements in the UK have had a lasting effect on the importance of wildlife (see, e.g. Garner, 1993; Perkins, 2003). This can be seen particularly in the case of the red fox, which until the Hunting Act (2004) was the major target of the British tradition of hunting with horses and hounds. Foxes and the ongoing political controversy over foxhunting have become emblematic of broader debates over rural policy and the overall position of 'the countryside' in British society (Woods, 2008), as well as constructions of (rural) place and contemporary national identity (Finch, 2007; Wallwork and Dixon, 2004). Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that media coverage of the 'fox attack' story linked it with foxhunting following the Labour administration's loss of power in the election in May (e.g. Bruce, 2010). Furthermore, the appearance of a spoof 'urban foxhunting' video (Atkins &

Howarth, 2010) and its widespread uptake by media and animal welfare campaigners is deeply implicated in this debate. One of the makers of the film had been involved with “hunt saboteur” activities (protests interfering with hunting), and they described it as a satire on the “media hysteria” around foxes that had erupted that summer (Lewis, 2010, p. 4).

That such hysteria can occur – and an ensuing hysteria can arise out of a video intending to question that very hysteria – demonstrates the strength of opinions that circulate in debates about foxes that this event was able to draw on for its meaning. As many writers about animals have noted, instigating debates about non-human species inevitably initiates unreasoned and vociferous debates because “Nothing could seem more ‘natural’ than the boundary between humans and animals” (Foer, 2010, p. 45). The urban fox troubles this ‘natural-ness’, its oxymoronic name testament to its reluctance to conform to human ideas of species specificity. And in blithely wandering from the countryside to the city, from the city to the street, and from the street to the home, it renders immaterial the boundaries necessary for coherent ideas of human identity.

Consequences

Running throughout this analysis – and the media coverage it examines – is an assumption that the boundary breaches carried out by the fox are emblematic of problems that occur when non-human species enter human domains. Yet this ignores the fact that non-human species are welcomed into many family homes, and play roles within such domains that are comparable to those fulfilled by humans; we call these animals pets. Indeed, Franklin queries those who assume the home is “*par excellence*, the humanist-modernist project” (2006, p. 137), and instead insists we should use a framework that acknowledges the “multi-species occupation of housing” (p. 138). The space that is breached in this ‘fox attack’ story is not one of an animal entering a home: it is one of *a particular species* of animal entering a home, an animal which humans have so far failed to domesticate so it can behave ‘appropriately’ in that space. What this points to is a complexity of understandings of urban spaces, whereby straightforward accounts of human and non-human realms, of the city and the wild, fail to acknowledge the porous nature of spaces that inevitably arise from a wealth of species living side by side. This complication is seen clearly in the term ‘urban fox’ and the debates over its meaning, for this discourse represents a confusion over what to call an animal that roams across spaces humans often keep separate.

This confusion is evident in the reporting of the fox attack, and the story was able to be maintained precisely because the event highlighted these competing

complex discourses. As well as confusion over what exactly an ‘urban fox’ is and how it should be expected to behave, we also see deep confusion over the correct attribution of expertise about such a creature, as well as the attribution of (human) responsibility for it. Entering into these debates is important, for how we think about rural and urban spaces, and the relationships between humans and other species, clearly has implications for species co-existence and environmental citizenship. As we have explored here, these deep-rooted assumptions about the separation of humans from the realm of the ‘non-human’ have serious consequences for both sides of the divide. Indeed such issues are now being debated within the conservation world, where it has been argued that such assumptions create significant problems: for example by excluding the perspectives and livelihoods of local communities in conservation planning (Claus, Chan, & Satterfield, 2010; see also Dickinson, 2011). It is unlikely that the urban fox will ever be eradicated from the city, therefore its continued existence, alongside that of other urban animals, has significant consequences for human-animal relations and the spaces which help humans police them. Furthermore, we note in the literature on human/animal relations a lack of focus on media and communications as a specific site of construction of these relationships: we hope that in future this can be remedied.

Throughout the centuries assumptions about animals such as foxes have justified humans treating them in particular ways, and animals’ failure to conform to human conventions has often resulted in them being categorised as a pest. Yet the newspaper reporting repeatedly demonstrates that humans are not very good at understanding the motivations and behaviours of other species; the shock of the event is a result of this fox’s failure to behave ‘normally’ or ‘naturally’. This analysis of the event, therefore, cannot hope to contribute to debates about whether urban foxes are a problem or not, or how humans should respond to their existence. Instead, it’s worth noting how such an unrepresentative event can lead to such widespread and consistent media reporting, for this story taps into human fears concerning other species and the boundaries of human space. After all, if someone can complain that “We have all seen them [foxes] trotting through the city in the dead of night as if they owned the place” (Sykes, 2010, p. 29), it’s clear whom we assume *should* actually own the place. We need to question the consequences – for humans, other animals, and the environments they coexist in – of a society which constructs ‘wild’ spaces as ones in which humans are absent, and ‘human’ spaces as ones which ‘wild’ animals should never enter.

(7,590 words)

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¹ This includes full text content of all the UK newspaper titles and over 500 regional and local news publications.

² The database includes stories from multiple editions issued through the day, as well as regional editions of newspapers. In all cases, the most recent, London based edition was chosen.

³ At the time of writing (mid 2011), repeal of the Hunting Act (2004) does not now seem to now be a particular priority of the new government (e.g. Page, 2011; Morris, 2011)

⁴ We have defined 'broadsheets' as the *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Financial Times*, plus Sunday editions where appropriate; 'mid-market' as the *Mail*, *Express*, plus Sunday editions; and 'tabloid' as the *Sun*, *Mirror*, *Star*, *Morning Star*, *News of the World*, *Metro*, plus Sunday editions where appropriate; 'regional+local press' included all local titles, plus regional titles such as *The Scotsman*, *Daily Record* and *Evening Standard*.

⁵ Chamberlain was initially jailed for three and a half years after the disappearance of her 10 week old daughter in 1980. She was eventually pardoned, and always maintained that a dingo (Australian wild dog) was responsible (see Healy, 2007 for further discussion of dingoes and risk to children).

⁶ See the BBC *Mongrels* website for further info and video clips:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00swyx1>

⁷ We note the presence of a significant literature in wildlife management on urban coyotes in North America (e.g. Weckel et.al., 2010), suggesting that similar conflicts and ambiguities are in operation here, but the absence of any social science analysis on this case.

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Notes on contributors

Angela Cassidy's research interests span science and technology studies, science/environmental communication, and human-animal relations. She has recently completed a study of public controversy in the UK over bovine TB and badger culling; and is now researching the contemporary 'One Health' movement for managing disease across humans and animals. She is a Research Fellow at the Centre for the History of Science, Technology and Medicine (CHoSTM), Department of Humanities, Imperial College London.

Brett Mills is Head of the School of Film and Television Studies at the University of East Anglia, and a member of the media@UEA research network. His research interests are in comedy (especially the sitcom), popular culture, cultural hierarchies, categories and genres, popular television (especially the documentary), and animals in media.